Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammā Sambuddhassa

INTRODUCTION

'Dependent Origination' – **Paṭicca Samuppāda** – is a basic teaching of the Buddha-Dhamma (Buddhism). The doctrine therein being so deep and profound it is not possible within the limited scope of this essay to make an extensive survey of the subject. Based solely on the teaching of the Buddha an attempt is made here to elucidate this doctrine, leaving aside the complex details involved.

Scholars and writers have in various forms rendered this term into English. 'Dependent origination', 'dependent arising', conditioned co-production 'causal conditioning', 'causal genesis', 'conditioned genesis' are some renderings. Throughout this essay the term '*dependent origination*' is used. Dependent origination is not a discourse for the unintelligent and superficial, nor is it a doctrine to be grasped by speculation and mere logic put forward by hair-splitting disputants. Hear these words of the Buddha:

'Deep, indeed, Ananda,[1] is this **Paṭicca Samuppāda**, and deep does it appear. It is through not understanding, through not penetrating this doctrine, that these beings have become entangled like a matted ball of thread, become like munja grass and rushes, unable to pass beyond the woeful states of existence and **saṃsāra**, the cycle of existence.'[2]

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1. The attendant-disciple of the Buddha

2. **Mahā Nidāna Sutta**, **Digha Nikāya**.

Those who fail to understand the real significance of this all-important doctrine mistake it to be a mechanical law of causality, or even a simple simultaneous arising, nay a first beginning of all things, animate and inanimate. Be it remembered that there is no First Cause with a capital 'F' and a capital 'C' in Buddhist thought, and dependent origination does not attempt to dig out or even investigate a First Cause. The Buddha emphatically declared that the first beginning of existence is something inconceivable,[1] and that such notions and speculations of a first beginning may lead to mental derangement[2]. If one posits a 'First Cause' one is justified in asking for the cause of that 'First Cause'; for nothing can escape the law of condition and cause which is patent in the world to all but those who will not see.

According to Aldous Huxely, "Those who make the mistake of thinking in terms of a first cause are fated never to become men of science. But as they do not know what science is, they are not aware that they are losing anything. To refer phenomena back to a first cause has ceased to be fashionable, at any rate in the West…. We shall never succeed in changing our age of iron into an age of gold until we give up our ambition to find a single cause for all our ills, and admit the existence of many causes acting simultaneously, of intricate correlations and reduplicated actions and reactions.[3]"

A Creator-God, who rewards and punishes the good deeds and ill deeds of the creatures of his creation has no place in Buddhist thought. A theist, however, who attributes beings and events to an omnipotent Creator –God would

1. Samyutta Nikāya, II, Anamatagga Samyutta, p.179
2. Anguttara Nikāya, IV,77.
3. Ends and Means (London 1945), pp.14,15

emphatically say, 'It is God's will; it is sacrilege to question the Authority.' This god-idea, however, stifles the human liberty to investigate, to analyse, to scrutinize, to see what is beyond this naked eye, and retards insight.

Let us grant for argument's sake that 'x' is the 'first cause'. Now does this assumption of ours bring us one bit nearer to our goal, our deliverance? Does it not close the door to it? Buddhism, on the other hand, states that things are neither due to one cause (**ekahetuka**), nor are they causeless (**a-hetuka**): the twelve factors of **Paṭicca-Samuppāda** and the twenty four conditioning relations (**paccaya**) shown in the **Paṭṭhāna**, the seventh and the last book of the **Abhidhamma Piṭaka**, clearly demonstrate how things are 'multiple caused' (**aneka-hetuka**); and in stating that things are neither causeless nor due to one single cause, Buddhism antedated modern science by twenty five centuries.

We see a reign of natural law – beginingless causes and effects-and naught else ruling the universe. Every effect becomes in turn a cause and it goes on for ever (as long as ignorance and craving are allowed to continue). A coconut, for instance, is the principal cause or near cause of a coconut tree, and that very tree is again the cause of many a coconut tree. 'X' has two parents, four grand parents, and thus the law of cause and effect extends unbrokenly like the waves of the sea-ad infinitum.

It is just impossible to conceive of a first beginning. None can trace the ultimate origin of anything, not even of a grain of sand, let alone of human beings. It is useless and meaningless to go in search of a beginning in a beginningless past. Life is not an identity, it is a becoming. It is a flux of psychological and physiological changes; a conflux of mind

and body (**nāma-rūpa**).

"There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination. Therefore, perhaps, I need not waste any more time upon the argument about the first cause."[1]

Instead of a "First Cause", the Buddha speaks of conditionality. The whole world is subject to the law of cause and effect, in other words, action and reaction. We cannot think of anything in this cosmos that is causeless and unconditioned.

As Viscount Samuel says: There is no such thing as chance. Every event is the consequence of previous events; everything that happens is the effect of a combination of multitude of prior causes; and like causes always produce like effects. The Laws of Causality and of the Uniformity of Nature prevail everywhere and always.'[2]

Buddhism teaches that all compounded things come into being, presently exist, and cease (**uppāda, ṭhiti, bhaṅga**), dependent on conditions and causes. Compare the truth of this saying with that oft-quoted verse of the Arahat[3] **Thera Assaji**, one of the Buddha's first five disciples, who crystallized the entire teaching of the Buddha when answering the question of **Upatissa** who later became known as Arahat **Thera Sāriputta**.

1.Bertrand Russel, Why I am not a Christian?, London 1958, p.4

2.Belief and Action, Penguin Books, 1939, p.16

3.An Arahat is one who has cut himself off from all fetters of existence (**saṃsāra**) and attained perfect purity and peace and realized **Nirvāna** through comprehending the Dhamma, the Truth.

His question was: 'What is your teacher's doctrine? What does he proclaim?"

And this was the answer:

'Ye dhammā hetuppabhavā
Tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato
Āha tesaṃ ca yo nirodho
Evaṃ vādi mahāsamaṇo."

Whatsoever things proceed from a cause,
The **Tathāgatha** has explained the cause thereof,
Their cessation, too, he has explained.
This is the teaching of the Supreme Sage.[1]

Though brief, this expresses in unequivocal words dependent origination or conditionality.

As the text, says, during the whole of the first week, immediately after his enlightenment, the Buddha sat at the foot of the Bodhi tree at **Gayā**, experiencing the supreme bliss of emancipation. When the seven days had elapsed he emerged from that **samādhi**, that state of concentrative thought, and during the first watch of the night[2] thought over the dependent origination, as to how things arise, **(anuloma)** thus:

'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of

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1 **Mahā Vagga**

2. First watch: from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., middle watch from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. and the last watch: from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m.

3. For the whole formula consisting of the 12 factors see the last pages of the essay.

this, that arises, namely: dependent on ignorance, volitional formations; dependent on formations, consciousness….and so on…This is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.'[3]

Then in the middle watch of the night, he pondered over the dependent origination as to how things cease (**paṭiloma**) [1] thus: 'When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases, namely: with the utter cessation of ignorance, the cessation of volitional formations…and so on… Thus is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.'

In the last watch of the night, he reflected over the dependent origination , both as to how things arise and cease thus: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases, namely: Dependent on ignorance, volitional formations…and so on.. Thus is the arising of this whole mass of suffering. By the utter cessation of ignorance, cease volitional formations…and so on… Thus is the ending of this whole mass of suffering.'[2]

One may justifiably be inclined to pose the question: Why did not the Buddha set forth the doctrine of 'dependent origination' in his first discourse,[3] the sermon delivered to the five ascetics, his erstwhile companions, at **Sāranāth**, Benares? The answer is this: The main points discussed in

1. Generally the two pali words, **anuloma** and **paṭiloma** are translated as 'direct order' and 'reverse order'. However, it is not quite correct to say reverse order, for it means: from the end towards beginning, or in the opposite order. Both the arising and the ceasing of the factors of dependent origination are from beginning to end. For instance, with the arising of ignorance arise volitional formations and so on. With the ceasing of ignorance cease volitional formations, and so on.

2. **Udāna** p.1

that all-important sermon are the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, its destruction, and the way to the destruction of suffering, the Noble Eightfold Way. There is no word in it about ‘dependent origination’; but he who understands the philosophical and doctrinal significance of the dependent origination certainly understands that the twelve-fold **Paṭicca-Samuppāda**, ‘dependent origination’ both in its order of arising and ceasing (**anuloma** and **paṭiloma**) are included in the four Noble Truths.

The **paṭicca-samuppāda** in its order of arising manifests the process of becoming (**bhava**), in other words, the appearance of suffering (**dukkha**, the first truth); and how this process of becoming or suffering is conditioned (**dukkha samudaya**, the second truth). In its order of ceasing the **paṭicca samuppāda** makes plain the ceassation of this becoming, this suffering (**dukkha-nirodha**, the third truth), and how it ceases (**dukkha-nirodha gāmini paṭipadā**, the fourth truth). The Buddha-word with regard to this fact appears in the **Anguttara Nikāya** thus:

‘And what, monks is the noble truth of the arising of suffering?

‘Dependent on ignorance arise volitional formations; dependent on volitional formations, consciousness; dependent on consciousness, mentality-materiality (mental and physical combination); dependent on mentality-materiality, the six-fold base (the five physical sense organs and consciousness as the sixth); dependent on the six-fold base, contact; dependent on contact, feeling; dependent on feeling, craving; dependent on craving, clinging; dependent on clinging, the process of becoming (rebirth); dependent on the process of becoming, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair

come to pass. Thus does the whole mass of suffering arise.

"This monks, is called the noble truth of the arising of suffering.

And what monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering?

"Through the entire cessation of ignorance cease volitional formations; through the cessation of volitional formations, consciousness...and so on....the cessation of the whole mass of suffering. This, monks, is called "the cessation of suffering".'[1]

It is now abundantly clear from the foregoing that the **paṭicca-samuppāda**, with its twelve factors, is the teaching of the Buddha and not, as some are inclined to think, the work of some writers on the Dhamma of later times. It is unreasonable, nay dangerous, to rush into conclusions without fully understanding the significance of the **paṭicca samuppāda**.

Dependent origination, of the doctrine of conditionality, is often explained in severely practical terms, but it is not a mere pragmatical teaching, though it may appear to be so, owing to such explanations resorted to for brevity's sake. Those conversant with the **Tipiṭaka** (the Buddhist Canon) know that in the teachings of the **paṭicca-samuppāda** is found that which brings out the basic principles of knowledge (**ñāṇa**) and wisdom (**paññā**) in the **saddhamma**, the Good Law. In this teaching of the conditionality of everything in the world, that is the five aggregates, can be realizd the essence of the Buddha's outlook on life. So if the Enlightened

1. **Anguttara Nikāya** 1 176

One's explanation of the world is to be rightly understood, it has to be through, a full grasp of this central teaching summed up in the dictum, **'Ye dhamma hetuppabhavā**...' referred to above.

The doctrine of **paṭicca samuppāda**, is not a creation. Whether a Buddha arises or not the fact that this conditionality goes on forever, uninterrupted and uncontrolled by an external agency or power of any sort.

'When this is, that comes to be,
With the arising of this, that arises,
When this is not, that does not come to be,
With the cessation of this, this ceases?'[1]
Imasmim sati idaṃ hoti
imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati